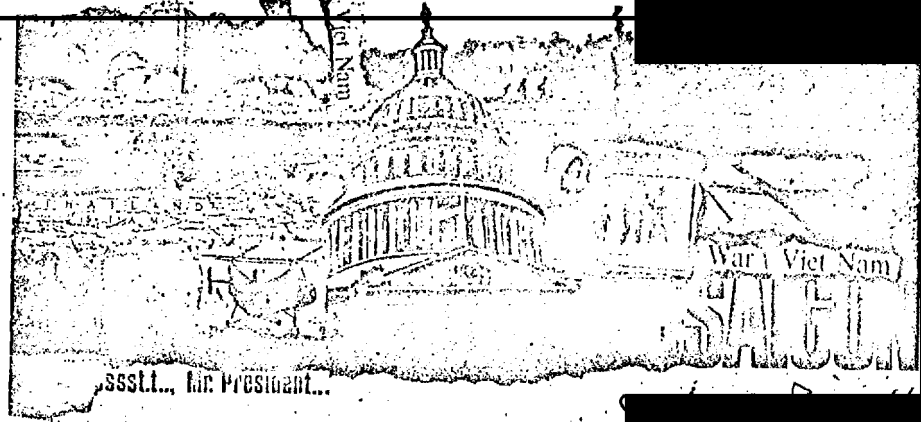


DIPLOMATIC NOTES

The Ten Commandments of
the foreign-affairs bureaucracy

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THE AVERAGE READER of the *New York Times* in the 1950s must have asked: why don't we take some of our troops out of Europe? Ike himself said we didn't need them all there. Later, in 1961, after the tragicomic Bay of Pigs invasion, the reader asked: how did President Kennedy ever decide to do such a damn fool thing? Or later about Vietnam: why does President Johnson keep on bombing North Vietnam when the bombing prevents negotiations and doesn't get Hanoi to stop the fighting?

Sometimes the answer to these questions is simple. It can be attributed squarely to the President. He thinks it's right. Or he believes he has no choice. As often as not, though, the answer lies elsewhere—in the special interests and procedures of the bureaucracy and the convictions of the bureaucrats.

If you look at foreign policy as a largely rational process of gathering information, setting the alternatives, defining the national interest, and making decisions, then much of what the President does will not make sense. But if you look at foreign policy as bureaucrats pursuing organizational, personal, and domestic political interests, as well as their own beliefs about what is right, you can explain much of the inexplicable.

In pursuing these interests and beliefs, bureaucrats (and that means everyone from Cabinet officials to political appointees to career civil servants) usually follow their own version of the Ten Commandments:

1. Don't discuss domestic politics on issues involving war and peace.

On May 11, 1948, President Truman held a meeting in the White House to discuss recognition of the

new state of Israel. Secretary of State George Marshall and State Undersecretary Robert Lovett spoke first. They were against it. It would unnecessarily alienate forty million Arabs. Truman next asked Clark Clifford, then Special Counsel to the President, to speak. Arguing for the moral element of U.S. policy and the need to contain Communism in the Middle East, Clifford favored recognition. As related by Dan Kurzman in *Genesis 1948*, Marshall exploded: "Mr. President, this is not a matter to be determined on the basis of politics. Unless politics were involved, Mr. Clifford would not even be at this conference. This is a serious matter of foreign policy determination . . ." Clifford remained at the meeting, and after some hesitation, the U.S. recognized Israel.

The moral merits of U.S. support of Israel notwithstanding, no one doubts Jewish influence on Washington's policy toward the Middle East. And yet, years later, in their memoirs, both Truman and Dean Acheson denied at great length that the decision to recognize the state of Israel was in any way affected by U.S. domestic politics.

A powerful myth is at work here. It holds that national security is too important, too sacred, to be tainted by crass domestic political considerations. It is a matter of lives and the safety of the nation. Votes and influence at home should count for nothing. Right? Wrong. National security and domestic reactions are inseparable. What could be clearer than the fact that President Nixon's Vietnam troop reductions are geared more to American public opinion than to the readiness of the Saigon forces to

defend themselves? Yet the myth makes it bad form for government officials to talk about domestic politics (except to friends and to reporters off the record) or even to write about politics later in their memoirs.

And what is bad form on the inside would be politically disastrous if it were leaked to the outside. Imagine the press getting hold of a secret government document that said: "President Nixon has decided to visit China to capture the peace issue for the '72 elections. He does not intend or expect anything of substance to be achieved by his trip—except to scare the Russians a little." Few things are more serious than the charge of playing politics with security.

Nevertheless, the President pays a price for the silence imposed by the myth. One cost is that the President's assumptions about what public opinion will and will not support are never questioned. No official, for example, ever dared to write a scenario for President Johnson showing him how to forestall the right-wing McCarthyite reaction he feared if the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam. Another cost is that bureaucrats, in their ignorance of Presidential views, will use their own notions of domestic politics to screen information from the President or to eliminate options from his consideration.

2. Say what will convince, not what you believe.

In the early months of the Kennedy Administration, CIA officials responsible for covert operations faced a difficult challenge. President Eisenhower had permitted them to begin training a group of Cuban refugees for an American-supported invasion of Cuba. In order to carry out the plan, they then had to win approval from a skeptical new President

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